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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 NEW DELHI 002110

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS, DRL

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL PINR KDEM IN

SUBJECT: RAJASTHAN BELLWETHER: RAJE REMAINS A STRONG
CONTENDER IN AN UNPREDICTABLE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

REF: A. NEW DELHI 00895
 B. NEW DELHI 5158
 C. NEW DELHI 02636

Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: With the western state of Rajasthan facing elections in November 2008, Poloffs held meetings July 7-11 with high-level state officials, journalists, industrialists and state assembly members. Despite the May 13 Jaipur terrorist incident (Ref B) and the violent Gujjar-led agitation from May 28 to June 23 (Ref C), the political and security climate is stable. Economic development in the state continues has continued for the fifth consecutive year, which many interlocutors attributed to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government led by Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje. Raje remains a strong contender in the lead up to state elections. All eyes will be watching the election results in Rajasthan for hints about the national elections due by May 2009. End Summary.

Udaipur Consensus

12. (C) On July 7, Poloffs met with academics, state officials, and journalists in Udaipur to discuss the current political and security environment. The consensus among political and media contacts was that the state government and security situation remain relatively stable. Former President of the Udaipur District Congress Party Madhusudan Sharma mentioned that the Jaipur bombing did not raise the security threat level of surrounding cities. He further accused Nepali and Bangladeshi terrorist groups of planning and executing attacks, in what Sharma perceived to be a strategic attempt on the part of "external groups" to incite communal violence in Rajasthan, which he regarded as a relatively peaceful state.

13. (C) When asked about the Gujjar agitation in the state, particularly as it affected law and order and the local tourist industry, Sharma mentioned that life continued as usual despite train and road delays during the month-long protests. Local editors from Udaipur-based Hindi newspapers,

Sumit Goya from Pratahkal and Giriraj Sharma from Dainik Bhaskar, echoed Sharma's views, further citing the state's record economic growth rate under the BJP-led state government as proof of Rajasthan strength and stability in light of political and security challenges.

Gujjar and Development Challenges

¶4. (C) Professor of Political Science at Mohanlal Sukhadia University in Udaipur Arun Chaturvedi shared more critical views of Raje's handling of the Gujjar agitation and the general political environment. In his view, the agitation represented an erosion of BJP leadership, and the ability of one ethnic group to wreck havoc on the political system. Chaturvedi posited that Raje engaged in backroom deals with Gujjar leader Colonel Kirori Singh Bainsla, noting that Bainsla's relative received a BJP minister position shortly after Raje announced the new reservations quota policy that ended the Gujjar conflict on June 17 (Ref C). He further contended that the leaders knew the "resolution" which ended the agitation would not result in real benefits for Gujjars since it will most likely face constitutional challenges.

¶5. (C) On the pace of development in Rajasthan, Chaturvedi agreed that the situation was somewhat better under the Raje government. Economic growth and the availability of resources had steadily increased under the current administration. However, improvements in health care and

NEW DELHI 00002110 002 OF 005

education have yet to be seen. He noted that local doctors are increasingly profit-driven and refuse to treat common illnesses, and as a result water-borne illnesses plague large segments of society. In the field of education, he contended that the RSS has filled the vast gaps in public schooling by opening up their own schools. This, Chaturvedi proffered, would "indoctrinate the youth" and create a cadre of BJP political workers.

Off the Beaten Path: Jaisalmer and Bikaner

¶6. (U) Poloffs traveled via road to Jaisalmer and Bikaner from July 8-9. The main roadway in rural Western Rajasthan remained rough and uneven throughout, and Poloffs observed few signs of commercial and residential development. Easily observable, however, were nomadic Gujjar communities herding hundreds of sheep, and subsequently blocking traffic, en route to settlements in the Northwest foothills. Gujjars traveling from Udaipur explained to Poloffs on July 8 that they sell sheep in urban centers, earning 35)48 USD for male sheep and 24-35 USD for female sheep. In regards to politics, an elder male insisted that they vote, noting a preference for Raje in upcoming state elections.

¶7. (SBU) Poloffs met with BJP leaders Gulab Singh, former Member of Parliament (MP), and former MLA Jitendra Singh in Jaisalmer, a rural city on the India-Pakistan border. When asked to evaluate the political and security environment, Gulab Singh observed overall peaceful relations among Jaisalmer Hindus and Muslim minorities, noting that both groups work and socialize together, including participating in each other's religious ceremonies. In regards to the Pakistan border, Jitendra Singh raised no security concerns, indicating frequent cross-border marriages and local informal trade activity. He echoed views shared in Udaipur, noting the state's record economic growth rate under Raje's administration. However, he underscored the need for expanding the Indira Gandhi canal to supply water for poor communities in the rural west. This idea has not gained traction in the Raje government.

¶8. (C) In Bikaner, a small city northwest of Jaisalmer,

Poloffs tried to engage BJP Mayor of Bikaner Shri Gopal Aggarwal on Rajasthan politics, but he stuck to the party line and reiterated points shared in Udaipur meetings. Popular sentiment was clearly in favor of Raje as state elections quickly approach in November, leading Aggarwal to exclaim, "No force in the world can stop BJP from coming back to power in Rajasthan." He further noted that Congress Party has not presented a candidate capable of opposing Raje.

Jaipur Contacts See Little Progress After Bombings

¶19. (C) At a dinner in Jaipur on July 10, political and media contacts shared unfavorable views of the law and order environment under the BJP government. According to Saurabh Modi, son of BJP MLA Vishnu Modi, the May 13 bombings represented a failure of coordination between intelligence agencies and Raje's government. Terrorism is a new phenomenon in the state and may have been instigated by Islamic separatists hoping to incite communal violence, he added. This fortunately did not happen, but India Today Principal Correspondent Rohit Parihar told Poloffs that Jaipur was not an isolated incident and that future bombings were expected in smaller cities with Muslim populations, including Jaisalmer, Bikaner and Pushkar.

¶110. (C) Education Minister in Rajasthan Ghanshayam Tiwari told Poloffs on July 11 that he expected further political challenges for the Raje government brought on by the Gujjar

NEW DELHI 00002110 003 OF 005

conflict. He recounted mounting public opposition against Raje one week into the conflict and growing speculation about early state elections among political contacts. In his view, Raje has settled the Gujjar conflict for the time being by granting additional reservations quotas for Gujjars and other caste groups. Tiwari, however, cautioned that the month-long standoff that disrupted daily life and resulted in more than 40 deaths may have left a lasting negative impression among constituents nationwide and posed a risk to strategic BJP vote banks in upcoming polls.

Development and the Need for Alternative Energy

¶11. (C) When Poloffs engaged Tiwari on development issues, he claimed that members of Raje's government wanted to line their pockets through development schemes. Tiwari raised the state land development initiative as a prime example of government negligence, in which prime real estate was purchased at below-market prices or confiscated from farmers. "It is the most corrupt government that I've ever seen," he added. Tiwari noted Raje's perceived corrupt practices have driven away a number of reputable BJP politicians, and her aggressive politicking represents an ideological shift in the party from collective to "personality-driven" politics. In this regard, Raje "gets what she wants, when she wants, no questions (asked)," he added.

¶112. (C) Sandeep Tiwari, Ghanshayam Tiwari's eldest son who currently oversees the family's agricultural land holding, commented on challenges facing the state's disadvantaged rural and working classes. He informed Poloffs that non-industrial sectors provide the most sustainable route for continued economic progress, including environmental management, tourism, information technologies and handicrafts. Sandeep expressed great admiration for western media and confided that Al Gore's documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" inspired his desire to pursue eco-friendly, non-industrial development projects in Rajasthan. When Poloffs asked Sandeep to evaluate the development situation, he lamented that current BJP projects were industry-based and benefited the privileged few in urban centers. He went on to describe dire energy supply shortages

throughout the country and that the common man was beginning to realize the importance of alternative energy sources, such as nuclear energy, and expressed popular support for the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Initiative.

Elections Outlook

¶13. (C) Contacts from New Delhi Television (NDTV) and The Hindu met with Poloffs July 11 and were generally convinced that Raje had recovered from the Gujjar debacle and will become the presumptive BJP candidate for the state Chief Minister position. Special Correspondent for The Hindu Sunny Sebastian noted Raje's pedigreed background and administrative clout as further distinguishing factors for clinching the nomination. However, according to Sebastian, Raje's larger than life personality and aggressive politicking have driven away high-powered BJP members, who were disgruntled over the perceived "corrupt and abusive" powers that her administration has grabbed. According to Sebastian, Raje represents an ideological shift in BJP leadership, from "collective to personality-driven" politics.

¶14. (C) When asked to evaluate Congress Party prospects in-state and beyond, Special Correspondent for NDTV Rajan Mahan mentioned that the party lacks direction and leadership, an opinion shared by former Udaipur-based Congress leader Madhusudan Sharma. Mahan told Poloffs that

NEW DELHI 00002110 004 OF 005

former Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot and C.P. Joshi are likely Congress Party candidates for Chief Minister; however, he noted that Gehlot was not part of Sonia Gandhi's visit to Jaipur after the May 13 bombing, which may indicate a falling-out with central Congress Party leadership.

¶15. (C) In regards to Mayawati and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), contacts observed that the party would have a difficult time uniting the fractured ethnic Dalit community in Rajasthan in time for November state elections. Sebastian speculated that Mayawati's charismatic leadership may garner votes from Congress Party's voting base.

¶16. (C) Both journalists hesitated to make predictions for upcoming state and national elections given the unknown effect of redistricting (Ref A) (Note: Redistricting is a constitutionally mandated, nation-wide initiative to redefine voting districts. End Note). According to Mahan, redistricting increases urban representation in state legislature and encourages "political jockeying" for lucrative caste combinations. Raje, for example, has openly courted Rajput votes in the run up to state elections. Given the unpredictable nature of Rajasthan's political landscape, Sebastian said that he would take a "wait and see" approach to state and national elections.

A New Voting Demographic

¶17. (C) Mahan mentioned the emergence of "Indian Yuppies," a burgeoning college-educated class of adults between 18 to 35 years-old, who are technically savvy and informed about domestic and foreign affairs. Sebastian further cautioned that both BJP and Congress should not expect "blinding allegiance" from traditional vote bases with the emergence of a more informed and energized electorate. Congress particularly cannot depend on the "Gandhi legacy" to win elections and must become more engaged on the ground-level to sustain support as highly contested state and national elections approach, he said. When asked about Rahul Gandhi and his ability to attract a younger demographic to the Congress Party, both journalists questioned Rahul's political acumen observing his "forced entry" into national

politics. Sebastian, however, noted his sister Priyanka Gandhi as the natural inheritor of the Nehru-Gandhi political tradition and predicted that her youthful presence may reinvigorate Congress' political fortunes among India's urban voting demographic.

Comment: An Emboldened Raje

¶18. (C) Buoyed by strong economic growth and coming on the heels of a widely praised solution to the Gujjar agitation, Raje's political popularity with the public continues to build. However, rampant corruption and perceived egoistical leadership have prompted grumblings within her own party ranks. In the end, there is no other BJP leader strong enough to challenge Raje, and the party will coalesce around her. End Comment.

¶19. (C) BIO NOTE: Ghanshyam Tiwari is an affable, godfather-like figure in Rajasthan state politics. He is a senior BJP leader and serves as a member of the BJP Central Planning Committee. Ghanshyam is among the most vocal critics of Raje. Ghanshyam comes from a long line of BJP politicians, and his youngest son Ashish will likely enter politics and actively campaign for the BJP in upcoming state elections. Ghanshyam Tiwari's eldest son Sandeep studied Business Administration in the UK, with a specialization in Management Organization. He manages the family agricultural business and is expanding into the organic farming sector.

NEW DELHI 00002110 005 OF 005

End Note.
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